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THE PHILOSOPHER AS SOCIAL INTERPRETER.<sup>1</sup>

JOHN M. MECKLIN

CERTAIN difficulties will always beset the philosopher in both teaching and research. As the critic and interpreter of life he must have something of the unshackled imagination of the poet, and yet he must keep philosophy at least a *geistliche Wissenschaft*, or be discredited in a scientific age. He must manipulate abstractions many times removed from the level of factual details, and yet he must never forget that these abstractions are only mental tools for the interpretation of experience. His life is one of high adventure and yet he dare not let himself degenerate into a spiritual buccaneer. He seeks the truth for its own sake, fearlessly and patiently, but the very purity of his purpose and the critical aloofness of his method may easily transform him into the prince of "high-brows."

Great philosophers from Socrates to the present have combined in varying measure two elements, the one speculative, iconoclastic, radical, the other empirical, constructive and profoundly conservative. Socrates was called the "gadfly" of Athens. He was in a deeper sense a social critic, seeking the reformulation of the discredited loyalties of his fellows. Every philosopher must have something of the "gadfly" in his nature. He must be the deadly enemy of outworn tradition and conceited ignorance. He must set free through the severe application of critical method on the one hand, and through the inspiration of the speculative imagination on the other. But these critical and speculative powers must be brought to heel in terms of a sober and reasoned sense of social responsibility. The irresponsible exercise of the critical powers leads to the negation of the intellect itself just as the unchecked in-

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<sup>1</sup> Read at the meeting of the American Philosophical Association, December 29, 1920.

dulgence of the speculative imagination encourages moral obtuseness in matters of daily life.

If we are honest with ourselves we must confess that much of our contemporary philosophy is occasional, fragmentary, negative, even futile. It lacks on the one hand the vitalizing effect of immediate relation to great political, economic or ethical issues, and on the other the clearness of aim and the balance of judgment derived from sympathetic contacts with the past. It often seems esoteric and fails to interest even the members of the philosophical fraternity, not to mention outsiders, because of difficult *termini technici* and the subtle differentiations between the various positions of the disputants. Technical terms and refinements of points of view are, of course, inevitable, even indispensable in many subjects, and especially in one as abstruse as philosophy. But the question may well be asked whether the superb critical abilities that spend themselves in more or less futile efforts to make clear the refinements of one's own point of view, or to grasp the subtleties of an opponent's position, might not be put to better use attacking the problems of the history of thought, or those of the existing social order about whose reality and pressing nature there cannot be the slightest doubt.

There are various ways in which philosophers react to this call sounded by the social issues of the day. It is often contended that the philosopher is neither a social scientist nor a social reformer, but that he sustains much the same relations to the social disciplines that the pure scientist sustains to the applied sciences. He is interested in the search for pure truth and the cultivation of the life of the intellect. The results of his investigations may have value for the educator, preacher, or social reformer, but that is merely incidental to his main task, namely, untrammelled speculative inquiry.

This view which is as old as Plato and eminently respectable has much to commend it. In a democratic age menaced by the tyrannous mediocrity of the average man it insists upon the right of the intellect to live its own life.

Its noble disinterestedness is a salutary influence in an acquisitive society motivated for the most part by an appeal to selfish impulses. Its academic calm lends itself to a sympathetic appreciation of the great thinkers of the past, too often discounted by the pragmatic appeal of the present. On the other hand, the cultivation of the philosophical impulse in an atmosphere of academic aloofness has its dangers. For the philosopher, no more than any other thinker, can do his best work without the stimulus of real problems, and the nearer his problems lie to life the greater the value as well as the vigor of his thought. We are living, furthermore, in a social order that is becoming more and more self-conscious. As this self-consciousness grows, society will insist that each member share its burdens, enter whole-heartedly into its hopes and fears and make his contribution, though it be ever so small, to the solution of the eternal social question. The training as well as the interests of the philosopher often incline him to resist this social pressure. He naturally seeks aloofness. The eddies and quiet back waters lend themselves to the philosophic mood far better, doubtless, than does the turbulent mid-channel, but it should not be forgotten that eddy and back water are merely by-products of the stream.

Finally this conception of the philosopher as the unprejudiced and academic seeker after truth seems to imply a similarity between the philosopher and the pure scientist that does not exist. Science deals with the *faits accomplis*. The permanence and trustworthiness of its conclusions rest upon the uniform consensus of experience centering around these facts. Philosophy, however, except in the case of the history of thought, does not deal primarily with a body of facts that are given once and for all. For this reason we can hardly point to a growing and unchallenged body of philosophical truth as in the case of the sciences. Professor Lovejoy, in an able presidential address of several years ago, suggested that so far from desiring such a body of scientific truth our philosophers are apparently more interested in maintaining the "unique," and consequently the unscien-

tific nature of philosophy. They seem to prefer the insights, original ideas or new hypotheses of the individual thinker to any tested body of scientific truth. In this they seem to be abetted by their reading public, for, remarks Professor Lovejoy, "The qualities which the general reader most values in philosophical books are not, as a rule, 'scientific' qualities. The public, for the most part, reads its metaphysics as it reads its poetry—for the moods it awakens, for the personality which it expresses, for the uses of edification to which it may be put, for the sense of being in the presence of the vastnesses and profundities which it affords, often for the mere pleasure of being mystified" (*Philosophical Review*, Vol. XXVI, p. 541). If we admit, as apparently we must, the inapplicability of anything like the co-operative methods of scientific research in philosophy, what right have we to claim for the philosopher a rôle of greater social significance than that of the poet, the essayist, or the romancer? Is philosophy to become merely an adjunct to literature? This seems to be a possibility unless we insist that the philosopher is neither poet nor essayist, nor yet reformer, but a critic and interpreter who seeks to see life clearly and to see it whole.

Opposed to the academic and idealistic conception of the rôle of the metaphysician is the general tendency to seek more social contacts for philosophy. The Syndicalist movement in France as interpreted by Georges Sorel, with its emphasis upon the strike, or a widespread, unpremeditated and violent effort for an immediate gain, has affiliations with the realistic implications of Bergson's intuitionism. Bergson's subordination of the logical continuity and purposefulness of the intellect to the irrational urge of instinct lends itself to a social philosophy that may easily become disintegrating, even revolutionary. The movement in England towards gild socialism has found a philosophical protagonist in Bertrand Russell, who sees in the gild a better instrument for the expression of the free creative impulses of the individual than is furnished by the state and the machinery of capitalism. Russell's glorifica-

tion of the untrammelled impulses of the individual, however, tends to discredit the disciplinary training of the institution without which impulse and individual initiative are meaningless. Among American thinkers the radical empiricists have gone farthest, perhaps, in their insistence that philosophy should be the hand-maiden of society. The exigencies of the curriculum, not to mention the scarcity of really great teachers, will always handicap our efforts to make philosophy a genuine force in the community. And yet the influence of John Dewey in education and of William James in religion indicates that there are other ways in which this end can be accomplished. How long before the philosophers will do for that valley of dry bones, the prevailing eighteenth century ideas in politics and economics, what James and Dewey have done for religion and education?

If it be asked in what way the philosopher can best play his part as the critic and interpreter of life, the reply is that his rôle in any community will be conditioned by the type of social organization, the needs and the national characteristics of the people concerned. As critic and interpreter he must fit himself into his day and age. What are the characteristics of American life? The American ideal, in so far as it can be said to exist, is neither philosophical nor ethical, nor yet religious. It is an ideal of *action*. The American takes life uncritically as he finds it and precipitates himself with abandon into various lines of endeavor, trusting to the give and take of clashing wills and the dumb compelling logic of the brute facts to show him the meaning of it all and to define the goal. In so far as he has any scheme of values, any thought-out plan, it is conventional and schematic. He yields himself uncritically to any idea that is appealing, or to any hypothesis that is plausible, trusting to the logic of events to set him right. He wastes no tears on shattered ideals; he has no time to correct false hypotheses; his successes are harvested in haste; his blunders are ignored or forgotten; his experiences are hardly evaluated before he must lose himself once more in the hurly

burly of action. Whatever gains are his are pragmatic, even haphazard in character. Seldom does he seek the *raison d'être* of things. He is not interested in the whole point of view.

The weaknesses of such a way of life are apparent. Being ever at the mercy of the immediately given, being tyrannized over as it were by an eternal and inescapable *Now*, we are seldom able to see the beginning from the end, or grasp the meaning of things. The actor in the drama may easily mistake the mere pleasurable glow of his own strenuous endeavors for progress. The task finished always points to other tasks lying just beyond, and this immediate sequence of act upon act, of event upon event, may be mistaken for growth, but such an assumption is entirely gratuitous. We may be merely the dupes of "the whirligig of time." Finally the ideas, beliefs or happy thoughts, struck out, as it were, white hot in the midst of the struggle may glow and fascinate like the sparks from the anvil, but they are apt to be just as short-lived. They lack the logical sequence, the maturity and the satisfying power that prolonged reflection alone can give. They are casual and crude thereby betraying their adventitious origin.

There are three qualities which the philosopher must possess if he is to make himself of the greatest service in this eminently pragmatic American society. First he must live *en rapport* with his fellows even though he be paying merely a lip homage to the democratic mania for the immediate and the obvious. In the second place he must cultivate the historical attitude. And finally he must strive to supply in a measure, at least, what the average American so desperately needs just at present, a thought-out view of the whole, a socially helpful scale of values.

From the days of Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin there has existed a curious dualism in the spiritual life of America. Our best minds, devoted to those higher cultural interests we associate with literature, education, and philosophy, have drifted aimlessly in the eddies, or lain

becalmed in the quiet back waters, while the great central stream of American life has plunged forward under the more or less planless urge of a philosophy of action in business and politics. The inevitable effect of this dualism is moral and spiritual impotence and the pessimism that always dogs the skirts of unreason. The shock of the great war has only brought out in more glaring fashion this lack of national integrity. The philosopher is by training and interests the synthesizer; it is he above all others who should give us the whole point of view. The philosopher, as a leader among our intellectuals, is to no small degree responsible for the present moral bankruptcy, the blatant philistinism, the cynical selfishness, the opportunism and disquieting aimlessness of American life. He who unwisely separates himself from his fellows usually incapacitates himself thereby for serving his fellows.

For the effective discharge of his duty as the critic and interpreter of life it is imperative that the philosopher bring to his task the historical point of view. There will doubtless always be a place for the historical criticism of the German type with its meticulous regard for the more or less unimportant details of the history of thought, its pious records of the stately steppings of the *Weltgeist*. But the history of thought must be emancipated from the aristocratic unreality of Hegelian traditions. If I may be pardoned for using a threadbare term, it must be socialized. American philosophers have as yet failed to give to the average citizen any intelligent interpretation of the spiritual background of our present civilization. We become deeply interested in the social and political *milieu* from which Rousseau's thought sprang. We sketch with enthusiasm the evolution of the England of John Locke. We follow the ethereal stream of romantic idealism as it meandered from Germany to England and thence to this country. But we leave our fellow countrymen to struggle in despair with the mysterious forces of "the Great Society" in which they are living.

It is, of course, an easier and a far more grateful task to



trace the development of speculative thought than it is to unravel the inchoate mass of ideas, habits, conventions and what not that center around such social phenomena as Protestantism or big business. To understand Hegelianism, for example, we go to the printed page, the academic discussions of the class room, or at most to the traditions of a more or less restricted group of scholars whose very existence is unknown to the great mass of their contemporaries. Yet it will hardly be denied that the influence of Hegelianism upon the life and thought of the average American is small indeed as compared with the *Weltanschauung* that took shape in the legalistic mind of John Calvin and still moulds in countless ways our political, esthetic, economic and moral ideals. Witness the present belated effort to revive the old "blue laws." It is indeed a curious fact that the far-reaching implications of the philosophy of Protestantism of the Reformed type for industry, as well as morals, art and religion were first grasped by Max Weber, a German economist, and found in a German theologian, Ernst Troeltsch, their first philosophical interpreter.

May I be permitted to cite one other illustration of my contention? It is a familiar fact that Adam Smith and David Hume were contemporaries, the dates of their births and deaths lying only a few years apart. The ideas of the former, especially in economics, became ingrained into the life of the English-speaking peoples and, joining forces with the mechanistic implications of the inventions that gave rise to the Industrial Revolution, culminated in our highly mutualized and centralized social order in which the machine-process is harnessed and made to serve the ends of an acquisitive society. The philosophical ideas growing out of this melange of mechanism and egoistic hedonism operate to-day with tremendous force to shape the thought and life of millions of Americans who never heard of David Hume. I should not, of course, make this an argument for dropping Hume and teaching Adam Smith, but it does seem that ideas actually influencing men in present-day society

ought to enjoy at least equal consideration in our study of the history of thought with ideas more purely academic and speculative in their appeal. There is, for example, no more fascinating task for the philosopher to-day than the critical study of the conflict between the outworn natural rights doctrines embodied in the organic law of the land as well as in business ethics and the world-view slowly taking shape among the workers and other groups under the cultural incidence of the machine-process and big business.

To his sensitiveness to present-day issues and his sympathetic insight into the historical background the philosopher should add the whole point of view. For without this whole point of view his work as interpreter is apt to be lame and impotent. This is the most difficult part of the philosopher's task. It will be contended that the vast complexity of modern life makes any whole point of view impossible. The speculations of our ablest minds, we are told, are at best superficial generalizations, their appearance of finality being due to artificial logical coherence rather than to an actual grasp of the facts. It will be asserted, furthermore, that anything like successful system-building is only possible at the close of an era. But we are apparently entering upon a new era. Experience is crowding in upon us in chaotic and irrational fashion. We are bewildered by an avalanche of opaque brute facts. Our perspective has been seriously distorted if not destroyed. We are hardly far enough along yet to attempt a systematic interpretation of the meaning of things. There seems to be a very general feeling, indeed, that the system-builder is at least temporarily discredited. We can detect a curious decentralization of interests among the philosophers. They are neglecting for the moment the time-honored problems of metaphysics for more immediate and pressing interests largely social in character. Some are moving towards the camp of the political scientist, others towards that of the jurist, and still others towards that of the economist. This seems tacitly to recognize that what men want is not so much a reasoned interpretation of the

universe as light upon their immediate problems. Perhaps it is just as well to lay the basis for our whole point of view first in the several departments of our highly complex life. In this way, perhaps, by "line upon line and precept upon precept, here a little and there a little," we may hope to accumulate in time the material that will facilitate a satisfactory approximation toward the final synthesis that is always the goal of the philosopher.

Whatever its difficulties the philosopher cannot escape this, his supreme task. His social significance will be measured mainly in terms of the extent to which he enables his fellow men to see life as an intelligible and purposeful whole. Professor Hoernlé, commenting upon the recent Congress of Philosophy at Oxford, says that the debates "left on all its members, who could look beneath the surface, one deep and abiding impression—the impression that philosophy is the one force which amidst the diverse and often centrifugal tendencies of modern thought and life makes for integration. True the task is huge and probably beyond the power of any single thinker. Still the value of philosophy is precisely in this that it alone has the ambition to attempt the task of integration. . . . It stands for the conviction of the unity of civilization. To realize this unity by a survey, and total interpretation, of all the main provinces of man's rational activities is the program of every thinker fully alive to the opportunities and the need" (*The New Republic*, December 15, 1920).

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